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Housing the Dairy Calf

National Dairy Heifer Evaluation Project

The future of any dairy herd lies in its youngstock. When production-proven artificial insemination sires are used, each generation increases the genetic potential for milk production. Providing shelter that is proper for the environment can help calves and heifers grow to meet that potential.

Dairy farmers can use a variety of facilities to provide the calf with an adequate environment: old structures or new, elaborate or simple. However, they must provide management and housing systems that allow the farmer to produce healthy replacement animals year-round that are ready to enter the milking herd at a reasonable age.

The NAHMS National Dairy Heifer Evaluation Project looked at the types of preweaned calf housing used by U.S. dairy farmers. The 1,811 farms in 28 states¹ were selected to represent

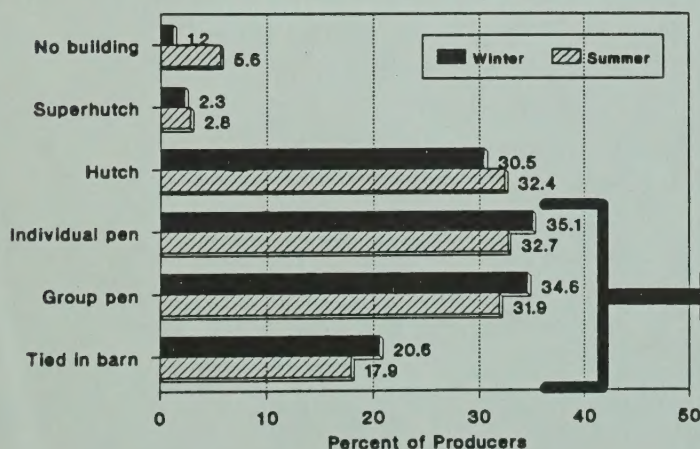
herds of 30 or more cows in those states and also represent 78 percent of the National dairy cow population.

Figure 1 shows the types of calf housing in use in dairy herds. Dairy farmers use hutches, individual pens, and group pens extensively to house calves in both winter and summer. Note that some farms use more than one housing type and at variable levels.

Nearly one-third of the producers house their calves in individual hutches. A distinct advantage of hutches is that they allow flow of clean, noncontaminated air. Hutches that are in draft-free condition (with no cracks or openings) and are well bedded complete the requirements of a superior calf housing system.

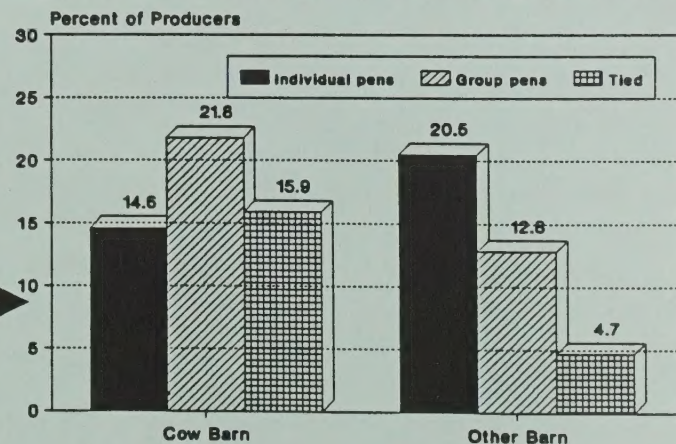
Figure 2 shows how many producers keep their calves penned and tied in barns. Percentages for

Figure 1. Preweaned Calf Housing by Season*



*Farms may have more than one type.

Figure 2. Calf Housing in Barns During the Winter*



*Farms may have more than one type.

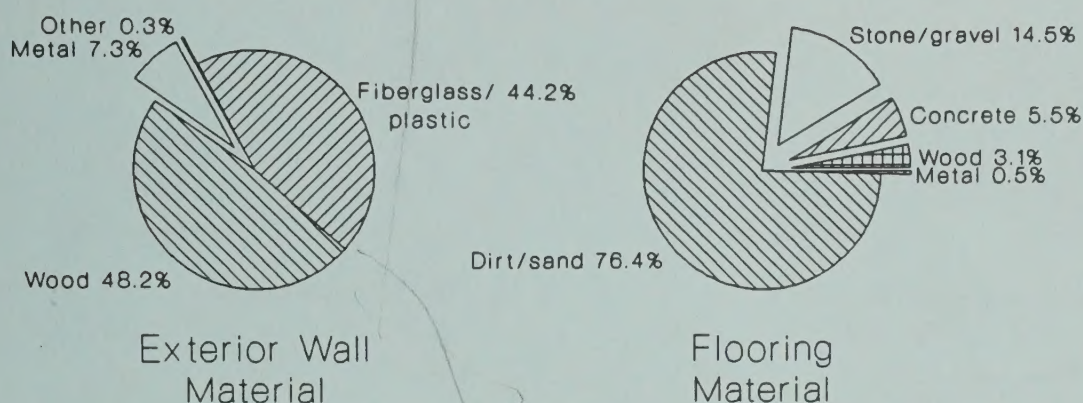
¹States participating in the National Dairy Heifer Evaluation Project (NDHEP): Alabama, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin.

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Figure 3. Dairy Calf Hutches: Construction Materials



the summer months are similar to those shown for the winter.

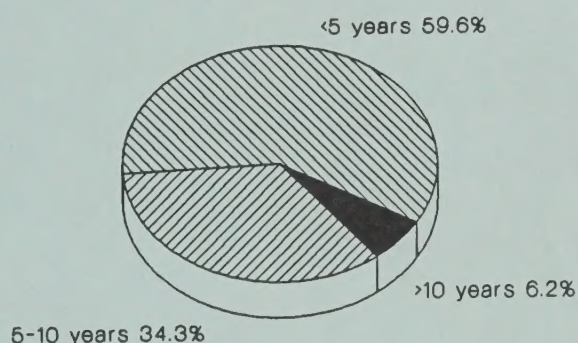
While most of the housing types shown in Figures 1 and 2 can be acceptable, many factors are involved in their selection and proper use. Elements to consider are potential cross contamination, labor requirements, and difficulty of providing individualized care. In each case, many management and environmental factors will determine the extent to which the facilities are adequate for preweaned calves.

The NDHEP results also provide information on the materials used in calf housing construction. Figure 3 shows that the majority of calf hutches in use have wood or fiberglass/plastic exterior walls and over three-fourths have a dirt or sand floor.

As for the age of the hutches in use (Figure 4), nearly three out of five are less than 5 years of age and another 34 percent are from 5 to 10 years of age. Approximately 1 percent are over 20 years old.

These and other variables can help determine the conditions of housing units used on dairy farms, their effects on heifer health, and the associated costs of maintenance and heifer health.

Figure 4. Age of Dairy Calf Hutches



NDHEP collaborators also included the National Agricultural Statistics Service (USDA:NASS) and the National Veterinary Services Laboratories (USDA:APHIS:VS) and State and Federal Veterinary Medical Officers.

For more information on the National Dairy Heifer Evaluation Project and other NAHMS programs, please contact:

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